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Tuesday, 19 August 2003, 11.10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Mekdad	(Syrian Arab Republic)
Members:	Angola	Mr. Lucas
	Bulgaria	Mr. Tafrov
	Cameroon	Mr. Chungong Ayafor
	Chile	Mr. Maquieira
	China	Mr. Wang Guangya
	France	Mrs. Gueguen
	Germany	Mr. Trautwein
	Guinea	Mr. Sow
	Mexico	Mr. Aguilar Zinser
	Pakistan	Mr. Akram
	Russian Federation	Mr. Gatilov
	Spain	Mr. Arias
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir Emyr Jones Parry
	United States of America	Mr. Cunningham

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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03-46938 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 11.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, and in the absence of objection, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Danilo Türk, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

I invite Mr. Türk to take a seat at the Council table.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Security Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Danilo Türk, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs. On behalf of the Council, I would like to welcome Mr. Türk, and I give him the floor.

Mr. Türk: Before proceeding to the item on the Council's agenda and offering my briefing on the situation in the Middle East, I would just like to say how very much we in the Secretariat appreciate the statement which you, Mr. President, have just made regarding the tragic events in Baghdad, resulting from a terrorist attack on the United Nations office in Baghdad. Undoubtedly, the Council will come back to this tragedy. But in the meantime, and in accordance with the agenda, I would like to proceed with the following briefing on the situation in the Middle East.

Since the last briefing to the Security Council, on 17 July, the situation in the Middle East has remained fragile. The recent violence on the Israeli-Lebanese border and in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is testament to that. It is noteworthy, however, that the overall level of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, compared to previous months, has dropped considerably, although, tragically, lives continue to be lost.

Despite setbacks, progress in some areas continues with the implementation of the Quartet's road map. At the end of July, President Bush hosted Palestinian Prime Minister Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Sharon for talks on road map implementation, reflecting the United States Government's deep commitment to the process. The international community should be actively supportive, and should work with the parties to seek ways to maintain momentum in this difficult process. However, there are no miracle fixes or easy shortcuts for the strategic actions that both parties must take in parallel to ensure the realization of the road map's ultimate goals: an end to terrorism and violence, an end to the occupation and a resolution to the conflict, leading to two States, Israel and Palestine, living in peace and security side by side.

The Palestinian Authority must intensify its efforts to achieve full security control in its areas. That is a primary obligation under the terms of the road map. The Palestinian Authority should also continue the reform process in order to streamline and professionalize the cabinet and the civil service and to secure full accountability and transparency. As was reported last month, the Palestinian Authority resumed security responsibility for the Gaza Strip and Bethlehem in early July, and violence in those areas has significantly decreased. Until now, however, and six weeks into the ceasefire, the parties have been unable to agree on the conditions under which the Palestinian Authority would resume security responsibilities in the remaining seven West Bank Palestinian cities. Both parties must deepen their commitment to security cooperation: it lies at the heart of further progress.

For its part, Israel should help to strengthen the Government of Mahmoud Abbas — Abu Mazen — and should take additional steps to improve the lives of ordinary Palestinians. Without such steps, the Palestinian people lack adequate incentives for peace. Israel must also recognize that its settlement policy in fact undermines the possibility of a future viable and contiguous Palestinian State. That also means that Israel should reconsider the construction of the separation barrier, and its route. We recognize that Israel has a legitimate right to security. However, the barrier is a unilateral act not in keeping with the road map, and we call again on the Government of Israel to halt its construction.

At this fragile time, each party must do more towards the re-establishment of trust and continue to explore mutual confidence-building measures.

Since the declaration of the 30 June ceasefire, there has been a noticeable reduction in the numbers of casualties on both sides. There were 21 Palestinian fatalities and 60 injuries since 1 July, compared with 68 fatalities and 111 injuries for the month of June. On the Israeli side, during the same period, there were five fatalities and 21 injuries, compared with 33 fatalities and 111 injuries in June.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that there has been a significant decrease in the number of Palestinian house demolitions, with eight cases reported in July, compared with 57 in June.

However, there has been a disturbing increase in violence in August. Tragically, on 12 August two Israeli civilians were killed and some dozen injured in separate suicide bombings in Rosh Ha'ayin and the West Bank settlement of Ariel. Such terrorist attacks are in clear violation of the ceasefire. The Palestinian Authority should do all in its power to apprehend the instigators of those attacks. The Israeli army has also reported increased incidents of Palestinian fire against its positions in Gaza.

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF), on the other hand, launched military operations that have resulted in Palestinian casualties. On 8 August, the IDF targeted a suspected bomb-making facility in the Askar refugee camp in Nablus. The IDF incursion resulted in the death of two Hamas activists and two civilians. On 14 August, an IDF operation in the West Bank resulted in the killing of the head of Islamic Jihad in Hebron.

The terrible cycle of violence and revenge must not be allowed once again to gather momentum. I urge both parties to exercise maximum restraint and to resist the urge to respond to provocation. Clearly, the onus is on the parties to agree to the conditions by which they can commence security cooperation in all parts of the West Bank as soon as possible, so that the Palestinian Authority can resume full security responsibility in its areas. This week the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel will continue their discussions concerning the handover of security responsibility for the towns of Qalqilya, Jericho, Ramallah and Tulkarm. This is a difficult process, but its resolution is key to moving forward.

One of the key challenges to the fulfilment of the road map's goal of a two-State solution is Israel's settlement policy. Phase one of the road map calls for the dismantlement of settlement outposts established since March 2001 and for a freeze in all settlement activity, including in the natural growth of settlements.

According to an Israeli monitoring group, some 60 settlement outposts were established between March 2001 and June 2003. The Government of Israel dismantled eight of those outposts, one of which was rebuilt in mid-July. A further 12 outposts were built by settlers, of which five were dismantled. The result is that as of 13 August the sum total of settlement outposts remains at 60. That is to say that there has been no improvement in the situation since the start of the process.

Since the last briefing to the Council there has been a significant rise in the number of reports of settlement activity. Settlement expansion plans — including significant incentives for potential settlers in the Jordan Valley, East Jerusalem and elsewhere — are being discussed by the Government of Israel. New bypass roads have been approved in at least three locations in the West Bank.

On 31 July, the Israel Lands Authority announced that the Defence Ministry had approved the issuance of a tender to build a number of new housing units in Neveh Dekalim, a settlement in the Gaza Strip. That is in addition to significant expansion of the lands surrounding the Morag settlement, which is also in the Gaza Strip.

As the Mitchell Committee noted in its report of 30 April 2001, "The kind of security cooperation desired by the Government of Israel [with the Palestinians] cannot for long co-exist with settlement activity".

The building of the separation wall, the continued presence of settlement outposts and the policy of settlement expansion have caused many Palestinians to question Israel's intent in the peace process. As noted previously, the continued creation of such facts on the ground calls into question the viability of an independent Palestinian State and contradicts the spirit and intent of the road map.

There were some marked improvements in July 2003 in the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, although the situation of Palestinian civilians remains dire.

The movement of United Nations and international staff into and within the Gaza Strip has eased considerably. Fewer access incidents were

reported by international humanitarian organizations — 40 in July, compared with 302 in June — and delays and denial of access for ambulances were reduced by more than half — with 41 cases in July, compared with 113 cases in June. Most reported incidents continued to come from the checkpoints in the Nablus area.

The IDF removed several key roadblocks in July in the Ramallah, Bethlehem and Hebron areas, although some of those were replaced by manned checkpoints. Changes for the better were most felt in the Ramallah area, with the removal of the Surda and Ain Arik earthen-mound roadblocks, although so-called flying checkpoints on those roads are often in operation.

However, most villages and towns continue to experience severe access problems, and the majority of Palestinians are forced to make long and complicated detours to reach their homes, workplaces, educational facilities and hospital services. Some 100 checkpoints — combined with another 300 to 400 roadblocks, earthen mounds, ditches and gates — remain in place in the northern West Bank alone. In Gaza, despite the new security arrangements, severe restrictions on movement continue to be applied to the Palestinian population living in some isolated areas. Restrictions on access and freedom of movement remain the single greatest impediment to any significant and long-term improvement in the humanitarian situation of the Palestinian population.

In fulfilment of Prime Minister Sharon's commitments to President Bush at the Aqaba summit, the Government of Israel has undertaken to release a number of Palestinian prisoners. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Detainees' Affairs, there are some 6,500 Palestinians being held in Israeli detention centres. As of 18 August, Israel had released 419 prisoners, according to Israel's prisoner services. Conversely, the Palestinian Ministry of Detainees' Affairs has indicated that since 1 June, 405 Palestinians have been arrested. I urge Israel to address this issue in genuine partnership with the Palestinians, and encourage a more broad-minded policy of release.

Turning now to the situation along the Blue Line, I note with regret the violent disruption earlier this month of the relative calm that had prevailed in south Lebanon, where there had been no major incident since late January. The Council will recall from its briefing last week that on 8 August there was a heavy exchange of fire across the Blue Line when Hizbullah attacked Israeli military positions in the Shab'a farms area. Fortunately, no casualties were reported. The Secretary-General was very concerned by that incident and asked for all sides to refrain from actions that would increase tensions.

I wish to remind all parties concerned that the Council has on many occasions repeated its position that attacks on the Shab'a farms are violations of the Blue Line. We again call on the parties to ensure that such violations cease. Also, consistent with Security Council resolutions, it is the duty and responsibility of the Government of Lebanon to ensure the return of its effective authority and presence in the south. Recent incidents make it imperative for the Government of Lebanon to deploy its forces in southern Lebanon to that end.

Members of the Council may recall that for most of this year we have characterized the situation along the Blue Line as having an uneasy, fragile calm. As we did during our last briefing to the Council, and as the Secretary-General did in his recent report on the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, we have continued to draw attention to the dangerous cycle of overflights and anti-aircraft artillery fire, some of which is not related to overflights. As the Council is aware, Hizbullah anti-aircraft fire caused the death of a young Israeli civilian and the wounding four others in Shelomi on 10 August. As has been stated on numerous occasions, one violation cannot justify another. The Secretary-General strongly condemned that action by Hizbullah and reiterated his call for restraint.

In his briefing last month, Mr. Roed-Larsen warned of the potential of this cycle for escalation and recalled the many times that the United Nations and concerned Member States have called on the Government of Israel to respect Lebanon's sovereignty and to abstain from overflights. As he said last month, those calls have not been heeded. He also presciently warned of the dangers of anti-aircraft fire from the Lebanese side.

Sadly, an innocent life has been lost. We again wish to stress the need for all parties to abide fully by their obligations under all relevant Security Council resolutions, in particular resolution 425 (1978) and the recently adopted resolution 1496 (2003), as well as to respect the Blue Line in its entirety. The people of south Lebanon and northern Israel deserve no less.

In conclusion, the situation in the Middle East as described is indeed fragile. As Mr. Roed-Larsen has

stated repeatedly, "Peace processes, anywhere in the world, thrive on forward momentum". Both parties — Israelis and Palestinians — need courage and determination to stay the course. They must not allow themselves to fall back into the tragic and senseless cycle of violence and revenge. I appeal to the parties to continue to implement the steps called for in the road map, in the interest of attaining peace and security for both peoples.

The challenges are also great for the international community, especially the members of the Quartet. We must do everything in our power to encourage Israelis and Palestinians to take risks for peace, and even consider new initiatives to energize the process.

Only resolve, determination and full-hearted commitment to the process by the parties, the Quartet and key regional players can bring us to the goals we all share: a just and comprehensive peace based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), and 1397 (2002).

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank Mr. Türk for his comprehensive briefing and for the kind words he addressed to me.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I should now like to invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 11.35 a.m.